



By Ben Wright  
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After securing more than \$1.1 million from the Georgia Department of Transportation, the city of Columbus is starting the final phase of the rails-to-trails project from Cooper Creek Park north to Psalmond Road.

"We will have funding to complete phase three," Rick Jones, director of the city's Planning Department, said Wednesday. He hopes construction can start by the end of next month.

Funding for the final leg of the project came together after the city spent only half of a \$1.2 million budget for phase two, from Columbus State University to Cooper Creek Park. Combined with federal stimulus funds and a High Priority Project Grant from U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., the city can fund the \$1.5 million projected bid.

Crews already are replacing bridges at old train trestles near Cooper Creek and Flat Rock parks along the 11-mile trail. When completed in the fall of next year, the trail will feature a 12-foot wide asphalt path from the 14th Street Bridge downtown to Psalmond Road.

The trail near the parks might seem like the most secluded area for bikers and walkers.

"It's going to take on more of a passive atmosphere in that part of the trail itself," Jones said.

“You are going to feel like you are out in the middle of the woods somewhere but in actuality you are not.”

There will be neighborhood developments on either side of the trail. A key element of the construction is making sure there's access to the back of Flat Rock Park.

“You could actually start at Flat Rock, ride all the way downtown and go out to Psalmond Road,” Jones said. “It would make for a nice excursion either way.”

While the last phase is under construction, Jones said the city is putting together signs and directions for users of the trail called Columbus Fall Line Trace. Illuminated signs 8 or 10 feet high will be posted for users to identify their location. More signs will be placed at intersections with panels to warn motorists about the trail and users possibly crossing the roadway.

Some new technology called the Hawk traffic signal is being considered for problem crossings at Hilton and University Avenues to alert trail users.

“It's nothing more than a great big trail light that users on the trail can activate,” Jones said. “We are going to try that. Other communities have tried it and we hope it will be successful for us.”

Jones noted there is still quite a bit of work left on the unfinished trail that's already in use by many residents.

“I keep getting calls about it,” Jones said. “I keep telling everybody the trail isn't officially open. If you use it wisely, make sure you are aware of the fact that some intersections aren't signalized yet. Motorists may or may not know you are trying to cross there.”

The signs may be completed by the end of October, allowing the first two phases of the trail to open.

To educate walkers and bikers about all the changes, Jones said the city will develop a program that can be viewed on the city's website or its public access television channel.

"That is going to be a big issue," he said. "We want to make sure folks are safe out there but they also know what the rules are."